

Not so distant, but still distant

You Can Count on Me, written and directed by Kenneth Lonergan

David Walsh
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You Can Count on Me is a first feature film by screenwriter and playwright Kenneth Lonergan. At the 2000 Sundance Film Festival it was co-winner of the Grand Jury Prize and won the Waldo Salt Screenwriting Award.

You Can Count on Me takes place in a small town in upstate New York. In the opening sequence, a couple is killed in an automobile crash, leaving their two young children orphans. Years later, Sammy (Laura Linney) is a single mother still living in her hometown, while her brother Terry (Mark Ruffalo) has led a more troubled existence, drifting about, occasionally in minor scrapes with the law. He pays a visit to his sister, for the purpose of borrowing money to help out his pregnant girlfriend, and stays on longer than intended. In the course of his stay, he develops a relationship with his nephew. Sammy is torn between an affair with her new, officious and married employer and an unsatisfying liaison with a longtime boyfriend. In the end, through a crisis, brother and sister reach some kind of painful understanding.

Lonergan's film is restrained and modest, self-consciously so. This is the sort of work that is pleased with itself for making the apparently surprising discovery that "ordinary people" have drama in their lives. Too much of the film is taken up with the effort to convince the spectator of its low-key, unassuming quality. Why not simply take life as the starting point and begin? I suppose, given the bombastic, overblown and empty character of so many studio productions, Lonergan feels he has to make a statement. However, the establishment of a different mood and setting than one finds in ordinary stupid commercial films does not solve all the director's problems, or ours.

There are likable and amusing moments in *You Can Count on Me*, but it is the sort of film that feels less

successful and more manipulative the farther one steps away from it. The dialogue suggests something of the contemporary off-Broadway theater, or one branch of it—a little mannered, deliberately small, not so much genuinely ambiguous as amorphous, the work of intelligent, sensitive people without a great deal to say.

From Lonergan's film we discover that identity is far more unstable than it first appears. "Sammy" and "Terry," of course, are first names that can be used by either gender, and, it turns out, the two personalities are somewhat interchangeable. We learn that Sammy has a wild streak and that Terry can be reliable and helpful. She wanders, at least morally, and he stays put with his nephew. And so on. I'm not certain how illuminating this is. And if their characters are not fixed, why the sudden reversion to type (when Terry smashes up his situation by introducing Sammy's son to his ne'er-do-well father)?

If one is mean-spirited enough to look closely, too many elements of the film fail to hold water. Sammy's character never truly coheres. She is first presented to us as a woman who lives an entirely conventional life. Indeed much is made of that. Her brother, in a casual remark, later refers to her torrid past. There's been no hint of that side of her personality until the comment, which she then obediently proceeds to justify. It's this sort of mediocre "literariness," the deed following the screenwriter's word, that drags the film down and nearly always keeps life and spontaneity at arm's length.

Sammy's son is relentlessly deadpan and her lover somewhat absurd, a bit of a caricature. More than that, the film's relativism—anyone can act oddly and out of character at any given moment—while seemingly liberating, in my view, is actually limiting. That an overbearing bank manager, a maddening stickler for

rules and regulations, attached to a highly pregnant wife, should suddenly take up with his female loan officer and spend afternoons and evenings with her at a local motel, seems unlikely. Such things happen, of course. Life is contradictory. But do social and occupational categories have any meaning?

The filmmaker wants to have his cake and eat it too. People commit reckless, irrational acts here, which provide a certain amount of dramatic mileage, but then they prove to be conventional and predictable, after all. Where does that leave us? Moreover, if someone acts “out of character,” wouldn’t that be the sort of activity an artist would want to investigate? Perhaps such behavior might hint at other possibilities, at unhappiness, at dissatisfaction. No, Lonergan allows the bank manager to return to his old existence without his inner or outer life undergoing any serious consideration. In reality, it was all just a device, to get laughs, or produce that favorite American cinematic trait, “quirkiness.” There’s something cheap about that. There’s too much that’s contrived and unconvincing about the whole work.

The brother-and-sister issue is also problematic. I didn’t find Sammy and Terry terribly convincing as siblings (although both performers are fine). They simply seem like two oddly matched adults, thrown together. Indeed the script almost seems to call out for them to sleep together. That sort of tension is of course possible between brother and sister, but it too would have to be explained. Again, the filmmaker wants it both ways.

The two are rather arbitrarily made siblings, without any of the implications of that connection fully explored, and then their kinship, in the final scene, is made out to be everything. (There is something truthful about the moment of Terry’s departure, which leaves Sammy gasping in pain, although there’s nothing specific to family relationships about that. He’s leaving, she’s staying, and the thought of his not being there, the thought that he’ll be moving around, in other cities, distant from her, is agonizing. I was moved by the pair at this point.) Somehow, despite a world of difference, they are joined at the spiritual hip. Why? Lots of brothers and sisters can’t stand or feel nothing for one another. Why should blood ties trump all the other elements? It seems a weak argument, something one resorts to in place of deeper, more penetrating analysis.

It’s unfair to Lonergan, of course, but there’s a comment in the production notes that seems telling. The writer of the notes has explained that cast and crew spent a month in and around the town of Phoenicia, New York, in the Catskill Mountains, all of two and a half hours from Manhattan. It seems that, due to the mountainous terrain, cell phones were inoperable. The production office and set had to communicate using a runner. Moreover, most of the hotel rooms in the small town were not equipped with telephones.

The notes continue: “The production had to adjust to these rigors accordingly.” Rigors. What can one say? Or, one might agree—perhaps what most distinguishes *You Can Count on Me* from conventional studio productions is the absence of state-of-the-art telephone technology. Lonergan’s film is not so far removed from the more convulsive realities and complexities of life as those more conventional works are, but it’s still pretty far.



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